Presbyterian Writers Guild

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This recognition comes as a surprise. In fact, when Barrie Shepherd called to tell me about it I thought he must have made a mistake and really only meant to complain about something in the magazine—which he never does, but plenty of people do. The fact is I don't see myself as a writer at all, but rather a reader who is regularly, deeply grateful that there are people who write. In fact, the celebrity of writers is second only to professional baseball players in my mind. I read and admire Barrie Shepherd's poems and literally quoted them in sermons years before I met him. The same is true for Ann Weems, and of course Fred who has been, over the years one of the truly formative writers and thinkers and preachers for me. I quoted Buehler so much while I was writing sermons that someone in the Chicago congregation one of his books and was disappointed because I had already used most of the material in the books.

So I am words by this award. It is particularly meaningful because it is the David Steele Award. I had long read and admired David's editorializing before I met him as well. One of the items in my "Keeper File" is a brief note and attached article he sent to me in January 1996, not long after I declared myself a candidate for Moderation of the General Assembly.

David wrote, "I know you are doing lots of meditation on the act of the possible! Shalom. David Steele. The editorial was on the looming ordination decision. After three years of study and discussion. David observered that the only consensus we reached is that we do not and cannot one another. David hoped that Gamaliel might show up at the G.A. meeting in Albuquerque and that some how we might come through, like the early church "free to get one with the works of Christ and free to disagree with each

other.” I got to know David after the Assembly and he is one of my saints.

Writers have always been conduits of meaning and truth and inspiration to me, as well as entertainment. John Updike was one of my favorites, our all-star up there with Roberto Clemente and Ernie Banks. I bumped into him on Michigan Ave. when he was speaking at the Chicago Humanities Festival, right in front of FPC. I knew Updike knew a lot of theology, cited Barth and Kierkegaard and Calvin and was to be something of a church person. So I screwed up my courage and introduced myself. “Mr. Updike, I’m an admirer of your writing. I’m the pastor of the church. “He looked at the church, looked at me: said: “ That’s nice” and walked away.

Reading and quoting Updike is risky business. In fact, a few weeks after I retired, at a Guy’s Night Out with sons, a few friends and the male staff of FC after a Bears game and

there was a roast. My colleague, Adam Fronczek, mentioned how much I quoted my literary hero, John Updike and then wondered about my writer for sermon illustrations. Then Adam regaled us by reading, in a solemn homiletical style the absolutely raciest most erotic passage of Updike he could find. (I bet Adam actually enjoyed his research, a lot.)

I had been in trouble because of Updike's .
In Columbus, Ohio, the wife of my son's basketball coach was the president of a woman's books club, and hearing me quote him decided that an Updike novel would be just the thing for the clubs next reading. Unfortunately she choose *Couples*, introducing the book saying the minister of Broad Street Presbyterian church had recommended it.

I love my work at the *Christian Century*, first of all because I don't have to work very hard. Journalists are introspective, come to work, go into their office, close the

door and write. The task of supervising begin and ends, with seeing if they should , saying “Good morning” and leaving them alone. I OK invoices, sign checks, keep an eye on the bottom line and get to hang out with some great writers: Borg and Brueggemann, Kathleen Norris, Martin Marty, Lillian Daniel, Miroslav Volf, William Willimon, Barbara Brown Taylor. It’s the literary theological equivalent to working at the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame.

The down side is that I have to write, an editorial, every other week, a short editorial, I am accustomed to the literary leisure of a twenty-twenty-five minute sermon. There are space limits. If I go to long I infringe on lucrative advertising space, so I mean do because Debra Bendis or David Heim edit me, something that never happens to the preacher, but which, I now conclude––should.

Roger Rosenblatt, in the back page essay in the *New York Times Books Review*, May 13, “The Writer in the Family” lamented that on of the of being a writer is that very few people know what it is you do (not unlike the similar clergy

“And what exactly do you do, Reverend, except preach once a week?”) Rosenblatt who lives with a daughter and son-in-law was taken to “show and tell” by his 4th grade granddaughter, Jessica. “This is my grandfather, Boppo—he lives in the basement and does nothing.” Rosenblatt wrote: “Someone asked me recently ‘You still working?’ as if the profession was a new sport I picked up, like or a disease I was trying to get rid of.”

Those of us who read a lot; those of us who write, books, essays, editorials, poetry ….those of us who once a week write a sermon for God’s people, know how hard it is to do it well, how hard to convey deep communication, truth, beauty, sacrifice, hope—but also how incredibly powerful.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was
and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The preacher knows, the writer knows. I hope that somehow our words become the vehicle of the Word, something in spite of us; the Word becomes flesh in our words, Our words, become a means of grace.

Words written with discipline and commitment, with skill and integrity, become words of grace to me, heaven of beauty and truth.

Marilynne Robinson, Hemmingway, Buechner. That is what we are about. You and I, that the God whose word is there from the beginning, whose word became flesh in Jesus, that God conveys truth and beauty and grace through people like

you and I—-who put craft, art and discipline and love to God’s being and love and Good News.

Buechner has a memorable image of that God whose Word is from the beginning.

“God is a poet, searching for the right word.
Moses …David …Elijah … John the Baptist …. Word after word, God tries and then finally tries once more to say it right, to get it all with one final word what He is and what human is and why suffering of love is precious …And the Word that God finds —who could have guessed it? Is the one, Jesus of Nazareth, all of it comes alive at last in this life, Jesus the implausible Jew, the Word made finally flesh is Jesus. Flesh.”

Thank you for this high honor. I will treasure it always.